

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 083

SO 032 320

AUTHOR Reese, William J.
TITLE Public School Reform in America. Fastback 471.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, IN.
ISBN ISBN-0-87367-671-8
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 63p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa International, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402-0789 (\$3). Tel: 800-766-1156 (Toll Free); Fax: 812-339-0018; Web site: <http://www.pdkintl.org>.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Context; *Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Policy; Educational Practices; Elementary Secondary Education; *Public Schools; *Social Change
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

Every era of deep social change in U.S. history has produced incessant calls for social improvement through the reform of the public schools. This fastback sketches some common themes and recent discontinuities in the history of school reform. It focuses on three aspects of change during key eras of reform: the sources of education change, the many-sided demands of reformers, and the influence of various reformers on social practices. Embedded in these concerns are fundamental issues of the changing definitions of schooling in society, disputes over who should control and have access to education, and how schools should be organized and what they should teach. The fastback comments on 19th and 20th century efforts at school reform in the United States and considers its politics and process. (Includes a 10-item annotated bibliography and 36 notes.) (BT)

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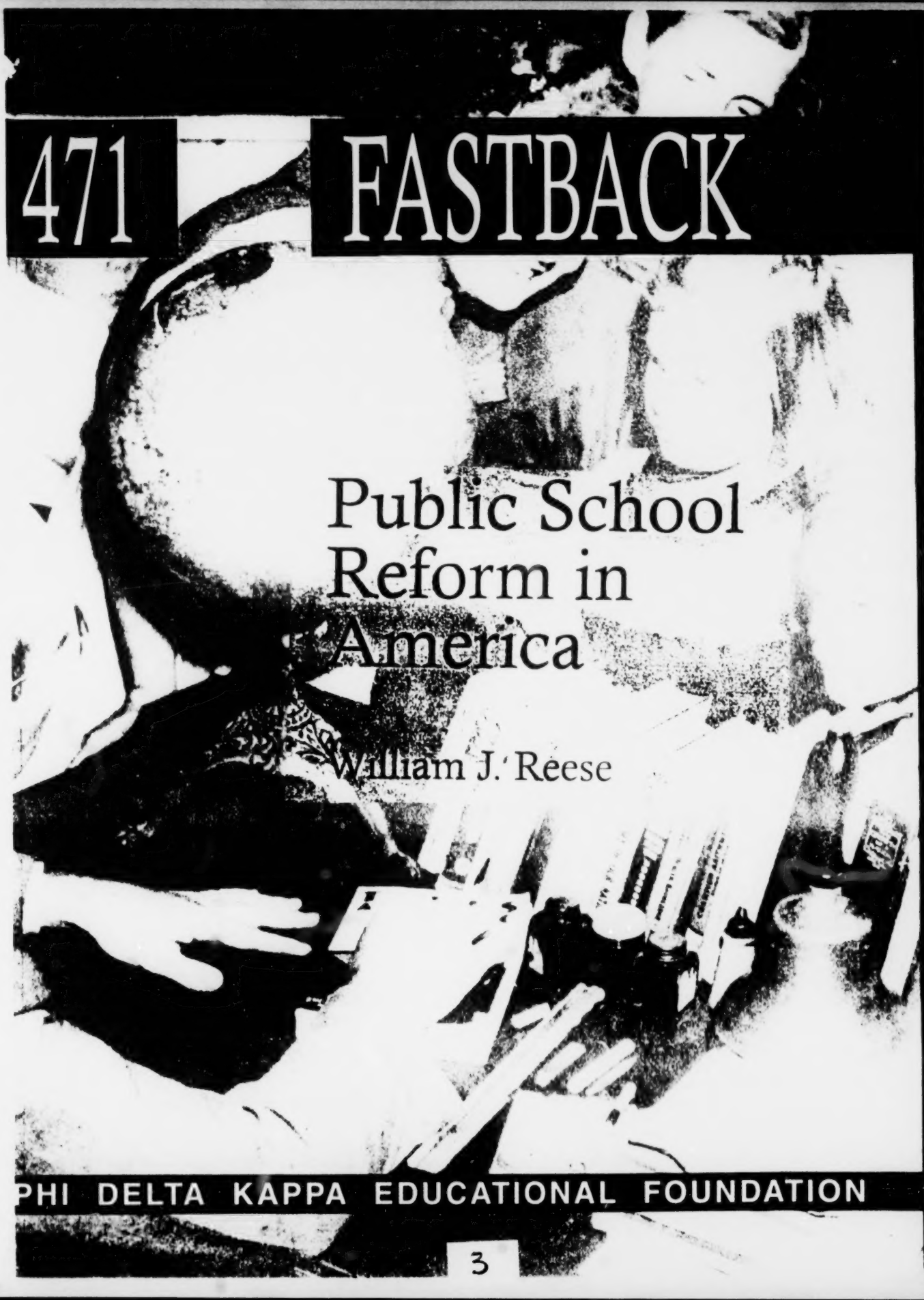
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471

FASTBACK

Public School
Reform in
America

William J. Reese

PHI DELTA KAPPA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION



William J. Reese

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He would like to thank Richard Aldrich, Edward Beauchamp, Barry Franklin, Herbert Kliebard, and B. Edward McClellan for their constructive criticisms of earlier drafts of this essay.

Series Editor, Donovan R. Walling

Public School Reform in America

by
William J. Reese

ISBN 0-87367-671-8

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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the
Shreveport-Bossier City Louisiana
Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa
International, which made a generous
contribution toward publication costs.

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Introduction

From the decades immediately preceding the American Civil War to the present, many philanthropists, self-appointed reformers, professional educators, and members of the lay community have dreamed of improving, if not perfecting, the nation's public schools. Critics on the left often have regarded school reform as a way to deflect attention from more far-reaching changes, such as the radical redistribution of wealth and power. More typically, however, Americans have expected schools to solve every imaginable social ill, large or small, investing high hopes and considerable financial resources in the promise of public education. The cause of public school reform waxes and wanes, reflecting wider concerns about the health of the economy, public morals, racial and ethnic diversity, the nation's security, and other recurrent issues. Every era of deep social change in American history has produced incessant calls for social improvement through the reform of the public schools. In many ways, reforming schools is one prominent way the United States tries to understand and to improve itself.¹

Debates over the nature and potential of schools have been commonplace in American history. Schools act as a social barometer, constantly measuring the nation against its ideals. Some reformers in every era claim that society should return to a better time, to a golden age when schools were better and youth more respectful. The jeremiad is an old theme in Western history, and calls for atonement and a realignment of values and behavior are familiar to students of our history. Yet Americans, even when most dissatisfied, have typically called for the reform of the public schools, not for their elimination. The sometimes utopian dream of perfecting institutions usually disappoints the pure-hearted when reality knocks. Still, that has never prevented the next generation of reformers from reviving the hope of educational transformation.

This fastback will sketch in broad strokes some common themes and recent discontinuities in the history of school reform. It will focus on three aspects of change during key eras of reform: the sources of education change, the many-sided demands of reformers, and the influence of various reformers on social practices. Imbedded in these concerns are fundamental issues of the changing definitions of schooling in society, disputes over who should control and have access to education, and how schools should be organized and what they should teach. Reform has never been a monolithic process whereby the wise propose ideas and everyone else adopts them. Given the heavily decentralized character of school governance in America compared to other Western nations, school reform is a complicated

process involving concerned citizens, educators, and activists on the local, state, and national level. Phrases such as "school system" cover a multitude of institutions, past and present.

School Reform in the 19th Century

The major achievement of education reformers in the 19th century was the establishment of universal, tax-supported public schools, especially in the Northern states before the Civil War, and in the South to a lesser extent afterward. As Carl F. Kaestle notes in *Pillars of the Republic*, school reformers did not cause increases in school enrollment, which were already high by the 1830s, when prominent figures such as Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher emerged on the public scene. Rather, school reformers helped transform the character of schools and their means of governance. Rising enrollment rates were part of a process that long preceded the antebellum period. In rural areas throughout the North after the middle of the 18th century, local communities established district schools increasingly attended by both boys and girls. Privately controlled academies, encouraged and sometimes aided financially by state government, also existed in some larger towns and villages, adding to the mix of opportunities for youth seeking elementary and advanced instruction in the new nation. In the cities, private tuition schools

also existed, often reaching a remarkably wide range of social classes. Nevertheless, these schools were not the domain of the urban poor, rising in number and of growing concern to philanthropic reformers and activists in the Northern seaboard cities in the early 1800s. These reformers, often evangelical Protestants representing a range of denominations, established charity schools for the unschooled, unchurched poor, whose young otherwise roamed the city streets and hustled to help their families survive. Reform-minded elites pitied these urban dwellers, questioned their morals, and complained of social disorder.²

By the 1830s and 1840s, the district schools of the countryside, often called the common schools and embracing most of the children in an immediate area, were becoming "public schools" in the modern sense of that phrase. Though they were not always completely free, they were open to all white children in local Northern districts and became fully tax-supported by the late 1860s. In the cities, the process was different, but the outcome was the same. Reformers in New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other places labored diligently after the 1820s to eliminate the free charity schools that had served the urban poor but had stigmatized the idea of free education. By the 1830s and 1840s, especially along the eastern seaboard and in most Northern cities, charity schools disappeared. Their pupils were integrated into a more inclusive public system, as reformers persuaded many middle- and upper-class parents to abandon the private sector to join the cause of universal public education.

Horace Mann, Secretary of Massachusetts' controversial State Board of Education between 1837 and 1848, became a nationally prominent reformer, calling for greater state control over local districts and more standardized education innovations. He and other major reformers of his generation urged local districts to adopt uniform textbooks, to establish more consolidated schools, to create more age-graded classes, to open free high schools (especially appealing to the middle classes), to implement a more standardized curriculum, and to hire women as elementary school teachers. Northern states did not immediately adopt all of these reforms; moreover, citizens often resented the demands by Mann and other contemporary reformers to centralize more education authority at the state level. Slowly, however, these changes altered local practice.³

What were the sources of school reform in the antebellum period? Historians have debated the answer to this question for more than a century. Before the late 1960s the prevailing belief was that school reform was part and parcel of a democratic movement that essentially had defined politics in Jacksonian America. Schools both reflected the benevolence of an enlightened generation of citizen activists and promoted democratic and egalitarian sentiments. By the 1960s, various scholars doubted that this explanation was either satisfying or accurate. They pointed out that the dominant school reformers of the day, such as Horace Mann and Henry Barnard, were in fact Whigs, staunch opponents to Jacksonian Democrats, fearful of popular democracy, terrified by those they called the ignorant and dangerous classes.⁴

Scholars who have debated the sources of change, the motives of the reformers, and the desirability and outcome of their proposed reforms have deepened our sense of the social context in which change occurred. As Charles Sellers explains in his history of the early 19th century, a "market revolution" transformed American society and its basic social institutions. Capitalism and commerce altered the economic face of America. Despite spectacular overall growth across the course of the century, the nation experienced a familiar, though unpredictable, pattern of boom and bust, beginning with the Panic of 1819 and continuing in a series of economic downturns and depressions that bred considerable social misery and public unrest. The rise of a more commercial and capitalist economy after the American Revolution stimulated the need for a more literate and numerate society, a demand commonly praised by essayists, moralists, politicians, and education writers in the decades following the Revolution. This demand for a more educated white citizenry to preserve the Republic, eloquently championed by some of the Founding Fathers, grew steadily, though the precise role of schools as opposed to other social institutions, such as the family, in promoting literacy and learning remains a matter of debate. Clearly, though, by the 1830s both Jacksonians and Whigs believed in the value of popular education in its many guises and in the heightened importance of schools. Whigs, however, most dramatically demanded more state intervention and tax support to ensure the spread and survival of free public schools.⁵

How to respond to the market revolution was no easy matter for school reformers in the antebellum period.

These activists often came from a wide range of middle-class families and included businessmen, professionals, and ministers from various Protestant denominations. Such prominent Whigs as Mann and Barnard had been trained in law; many state superintendents of public instruction, authors of school textbooks, and fellow reformers were either ordained ministers or deeply involved in attempts at moral uplift, such as temperance and revivalism. Most paid homage to the importance of the education of free white men, emphasizing the sober responsibilities of those living in a republic with an increasingly broadened franchise. However, as Michael B. Katz and other scholars demonstrate, reformers also were anxious about the dramatic changes transforming society. They feared the social disorder and supposed moral decline that occurred as increased numbers of poor people, displaced rural youth, and especially Irish Catholic immigrants swelled the urban population and labor force.⁶

Whigs, and to a lesser degree Democrats, did not believe in a laissez faire state. Whigs supported more public taxation for schools (as well as public and private investment in canals, plank roads, railroads, and other internal improvements) in the name of the common good. Were their motives guided by altruism? This, too, was debated by contemporary critics and later scholars. While historians today might interpret elite reformers as behaving selfishly — preserving the class system and their dominant position within it — these social activists at the time assumed that they were guided by morally sound values of political economy. That is, Adam Smith

in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 and other influential theorists afterward claimed that the pursuit of self-interest enhanced the public interest through the mysterious workings of the invisible hand. The massive accumulation of capital was not a sign of greed; in reality it helped the poor, because investments in jobs would make poverty less likely. While most educators and school reformers were hardly close students of political economy, they shared the belief, echoed in countless school books, that America was a land of boundless opportunity, that socialist and agrarian movements were dangerous, and that hard work, luck, and pluck usually led to individual success. Educators and many reformers believed that by teaching the majority of children in a common institution such as the public school, society would have a higher moral tone, smarter citizens, and some basis for mutual understanding among different social classes in a time of rapid social change.⁷

While Whigs often led the charge for more funding for education and increased state-level promotion of particular reforms, leaders in both major parties supported public schools, which throughout the North gradually undermined the place of pay schools and tuition academies in the city and countryside. Only the very rich continued to attend ever-more exclusive private schools after the Civil War, at least in the North. In the South, many citizens continued to view education as a private matter, not a public concern. The traditional idea that a free education (largely for whites) was a form of charity, unfit for any but the pauper classes, remained powerful in the postbellum South and died very

slowly and never completely. Southern politicians and political economists denied the Northern claim, so common after the Revolution, that political independence and literacy were essential to individual freedom and republicanism. Apologists for slavery, fearful of the effects of literacy on slaves and poor whites, emphasized that neither Southern manhood, individual rights, republicanism, nor regional glory required attendance in a Northern-style public school.⁸

The widening cultural chasm between North and South can be seen in the different ways these regions responded to the market revolution. The profitability of the Southern slave system depended on access to Northern as well as world markets; slavery hardly existed outside the capitalist system. But the region's dominant leaders rejected the idea that mass literacy was desirable or essential to their vision of republicanism. In the North, however, after the 1820s middle-class writers continued to emphasize the value of literacy and numeracy in a growing republic. Members of the Whig and later the Republican parties, concentrated in the North, emphasized the intimate ties between free men, free labor, free land, and free education. Authors of school textbooks (usually members of these parties) hammered home the idea that certain values promoted the survival of a republican, market culture: punctuality, self-help, individual responsibility, delayed gratification, and deference to authority.

Neither antebellum theorists nor textbook writers had invented these ideas, which seemed to be taught diligently in most schools. Schoolmen had taught them

long before capitalist modes of production became commonplace. But by the antebellum period, the emphasis on these values intensified, the subject of countless sermons and harped on in school readers, songbooks, advice manuals, and other popular reading materials.⁹

Antebellum America was swept along by many currents of reform, often evangelical in origin and spirit. The erosion of familiar economic practices and transformation of social relations due to the spread of capitalism were accompanied by waves upon waves of religious revivalism. As the market system energized expanding communities, such as Rochester, New York, and villages along the Erie Canal in the 1820s and 1830s, religious revivalists set the area aflame. Day laborers cut off from family and church, middle-class clerks faced with a loss of job independence, small businessmen faced with the prospects of economic splendor or ruin — everywhere willing listeners appeared, as revivalists demanded personal discipline, teetotaling, and moral rejuvenation. The discipline of the workplace, school, and church all emphasized the methodical inculcation of moral habits among the young and old, either to avoid penury or to catch a glimpse of salvation in a glorious afterlife. Baptists and Methodists, who championed the new evangelical style, soon became the largest Protestant denominations in antebellum America. At first seeming to offer a critique of the effects of market capitalism, revivalism ultimately seemed to support the emerging free-market culture. In church, as at school, individuals were taught the essential goodness of the prevailing social order, the evils of socialist alternatives,

and their personal responsibility to work hard, apply themselves, and arrive at work (or their children at school) promptly and eager to succeed. How work was to be regulated was a pressing concern of the times.¹⁰

Schools, which primarily taught basic subjects and moral lessons, did not directly teach children how to become laborers. Most white children attended them for only a few years. Schools were hardly the anteroom to the factory or shop floor or threshing room. Still, schools taught intellectual skills helpful in most adult settings and moral values in harmony with dominant values embraced by employers. In history class children memorized patriotic material, highlighting the glory of America and the abundant opportunities available in this republic compared to old, class-ridden, corrupt Europe. In the cities in particular, teachers kept records on children's deportment, attendance, and school performance. Again, there was hardly a perfect fit between the intellectual and moral purposes of schools and the job market. And while boys and girls were usually taught the same lessons and mostly attended coeducational schools, most occupations, except for a handful, were closed to women. The main exception for women was teaching in the primary schools, for which a sound intellectual and moral education had clear benefits outside the home, and which attracted young women by the tens of thousands by the late antebellum period.¹¹

School reformers before the Civil War tried to address a number of pressing problems, none of which were especially rooted in education. They wanted to educate white youth together for social harmony and to strength-

en republican institutions. They largely acquiesced to the prevalence of racial segregation (and denial of full educational opportunities) in the North and to slavery in the South, and they blamed urban squalor and rising poverty on the behavior of the poor, not on the inequities of the market system. Reformers urged the teaching of a common set of values in common institutions, in response to the dislocations caused by the increased division of labor in the economy, which separated owners and laborers, skilled and unskilled workers into separate spheres at work, neighborhood, church, and school. Almost universally native-born Protestants, the reformers usually were disdainful toward Catholics, who disliked the pan-Protestant tone of the schools and for whom a presumed neutrality in moral education (reading from the Bible without comment, for example) was hardly an acceptable practice. The disestablishment of all state religions by the early 1830s only heightened the concerns of middle-class moralists and reformers, who thought of their own moral and religious values as synonymous with American values. In a time of tremendous economic and social change, school people demanded that individuals take most responsibility for their own destiny, both for here and the hereafter. Everyone needed to absorb the values of punctuality, hard work, application, delayed gratification, and Protestant morality. Only a handful of socialist and other radical critics, who were largely ignored or condemned, suggested that the market revolution had destroyed the place of the individual in shaping one's destiny, that economic independence was an illusion.¹²

How effective were the reformers in transforming education policy in the 19th century? The picture is mixed. Like most contemporaries animated by a firm sense of religious and moral mission, school reformers often had a utopian streak. Horace Mann, the most famous education leader of the century, at different times claimed that school attendance would lessen crime, increase moral behavior, cut absenteeism in factories, lead to more productive lives, save the republic, assimilate the foreign born, and end poverty. He and countless administrators and teachers told students to assume personal responsibility for their own academic progress, to prepare for their lives as responsible adults. But they also were nervous about pushing such values too far, knowing from their own Sunday school lessons as children that Christians owed charity and perhaps some measure of justice to the weak and poor. Teaching children to take full credit for their own failures and successes while simultaneously caring for others at appropriate moments has never been a simple message to assimilate. And for the historian trying to reconstruct the social history of earlier periods, it is much easier to quote reformers on their utopian, sometimes contradictory goals than to say with much certainty what students learned or what difference school attendance made in their lives. For the vast majority of children, going to school in the 19th century comprised only a few years of life. It is impossible to sort out persuasively the effect that schools had on personal development compared with the influence of parents, friends, churches, and other institutions. That sort of social his-

tory is in its infancy, now available only for the most atypical scholars, high school students.¹³

The implementation of various reforms also had a mixed record. Primary schools in the North did become largely dominated by women teachers after the Civil War, and local educators and state officials applauded this development. Many other reforms championed by Whig reformers after the 1830s also were adopted, though in more piecemeal fashion, including high schools, graded classrooms, a more uniform curriculum, and standardized textbooks. But the vast majority of schools even late in the century were one- or two-room country schools, not centralized urban schools. Many village schools in the Northern states consolidated into larger and more centralized "union" schools starting in the 1840s, so consolidation outside the cities was hardly unknown. Still, cities — with their larger, more concentrated populations — were the most successful at adopting a more standardized curriculum, a better graded course of study, uniform textbooks, and full-fledged three- or four-year high schools. Many urban schools did not become fully age-graded until the 1930s, highlighting the differences between proposals for change and the realities in the schools.¹⁴

By the end of the Civil War, the public schools of the North thus had become largely free and universally attended for a few years by most white boys and girls. Most citizens viewed them as essential for the promotion of basic knowledge and moral values in a free-market, republican society. The three R's — reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic — formed the core of the curriculum for most

students, supplemented after the 1830s in many districts with geography, history, and English grammar. For the few who could attend the public high school, more advanced subjects (especially in the non-classical branches) provided further enlightenment and some occupational training for a small percentage of young people. By the 1880s, many women teachers had attended, even if they had not graduated from, high school. Many middle-class boys who attended high school became clerks, small businessmen, or sometimes entered college.¹⁵

In a larger sense, however, the public schools of the North had failed to live up to their most grandiose promises: Poverty had not disappeared, most children attended ungraded country schools, and social conflict seemed only to grow. Labor struggles intensified as depressions and economic downturns wracked the nation between the early 1870s and the late 1890s. Crime remained a common complaint. Victorian writers and social critics condemned cities as cauldrons of vice, populated by immoral immigrants whose foreign ways undermined social stability. From a later vantage point, one can say that schools should not have been expected to solve these problems, which were not educational in nature but were rooted in the great battles between capital and labor that shaped the political economy of the 19th century. But school reform had been born in a period when millennial expectations flourished, even deepened as America moved to a more capitalist culture. The more social classes formed, the more a broad range of middle-class educators, moralists, and politi-

cal leaders emphasized the centrality of schools in the making of a better, more cohesive society. That schools alone could not effect such grandiose changes seems obvious in retrospect, but this was not the view of most contemporary social observers. Those who fostered public schools before the Civil War attacked Owenite socialists and others who questioned the moral foundations of capitalism and its attendant institutions. After the Civil War, educators would similarly join with prominent members of the propertied and professional classes to condemn communists, labor leaders, and other agrarian and urban radicals. Free schools had become a permanent part of the Northern social landscape, the hope of the republic.¹⁶

After the Civil War, leaders of the Republican Party continued to provide steadfast support for public schools. Based in the North, the party of Lincoln was formed from the remnants of different political parties before the Civil War, including the Whigs. As historian Eric Foner notes, Republicans championed free men, free labor, free land, and also free schools. After the war Northern educators, the most prominent of whom built careers within the burgeoning school bureaucracies in the cities, continued to demand the construction of more elaborate school buildings, more consolidated systems, and greater expertise in education administration. As city populations swelled, leading to overcrowded schools that often turned away thousands of children annually, schoolmen invoked familiar calls for more tax dollars to educate children in a more complex, free-market society, one in which the division of labor became more

pronounced as industrialization transformed the world of work. City superintendents such as William T. Harris, rising to national fame through his work in St. Louis, emphasized the need to prepare youth for life in a more complicated economic system, where interdependence and thus deference to others was basic to life. Just as authority flowed downward in city systems, from the school board to the superintendent to the local principals to their teachers and on down to the pupils, students had to learn the value of self-control, personal responsibility, and their place in a complex social order. A vehement critic of communism, Harris wanted schools to produce thoughtful, intelligent, morally upright pupils to resist the appeals of radical politicians and to accept industrialism and state authority as a high, necessary form of social evolution. His mastery of Hegelian theories about the state made Harris, a long-term U.S. Commissioner of Education, an unusual school leader. His social conservatism was hardly out of character in the circle of leading schoolmen of the late 19th century, but his defense of academic instruction for every student and suspicions about the emerging vocational education movement proved prescient.¹⁷

As the bloom of religious enthusiasm fades, revivalists often lose their anti-establishment quality and call for new institutions to take root to carry on the crusade. The message from Bethlehem led to the building of churches, and the message of antebellum school reformers similarly led to more bureaucracy and system building after Appomattox. By the early 20th century, America entered a new age, an industrial society that

sparked economic expansion but also threatened to undermine social stability. This helped produce many-sided demands for change and reform, in schools as well as in other basic social institutions. How would schools, shaped in a pre-industrial world, respond to the challenges of a new age? No one knew the answer.

By the 1890s another complicated era of reform emerged that led to important debates about the nature of schools for decades to come. Already in the 1870s, many writers had spoken of the promise of the "new education." By this they generally meant the flowering of pedagogical ideas that first grew popular in enlightened circles in Europe earlier in the century before becoming transplanted and cultivated on these shores. An amalgam of ideas, rather than a single phenomenon, the new education drew on the writings of Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel, taking its most obvious institutional form in the kindergarten. The new education, said its various proponents, promised to treat each child as an individual, to offer a more natural means of educating the young, and to provide instruction in fundamental concepts, not simply through textbooks, but first through familiar objects. Other advocates for change, at a time when ideas about evolution and adaptation for survival were in the air, called for the addition of manual-training exercises in every classroom. This echoed earlier calls to educate the hand as well as the heart and mind, but assumed greater urgency as the division of labor destroyed familiar craft skills and the nature of traditional working-class life. Industrialization increasingly separated many young people from

artisan culture, where the mysteries of making everyday goods once stood exposed in the workshop or farm. Reformers with little interest in early childhood education or in some of the highly formalized ideas of writers such as Froebel thus demanded attention to teaching children ideas about space, proportion, and so forth, through drawing and other skills requiring manual dexterity. By the early 1890s only a small percentage of public schools actually had experimented with kindergartens. Textbooks, recitations, and traditional pedagogy remained dominant in most elementary classes despite the inroads made by the new education, as revealed in a celebrated series of muckraking essays in the *Forum* by Joseph Mayer Rice, a pediatrician. By the early 20th century, however, all of America, including the schools, seemed convulsed by change.¹⁸

School Reform in the 20th Century

A new type of competitive society emerged in the late 19th and early decades of the 20th century. Social forces present before the Civil War — urbanization, industrialization, and immigration — continued to transform the land, and with it basic social institutions. Cities grew as commerce increased and industrialization further eroded familiar patterns of work and agrarian traditions. Capitalism now entered a new, distinctive phase, as the captains of industry used legal and extra-legal means to form more concentrated industries in their quest for monopoly control. Strikes, already bloody and violent since the famous conflicts of the 1870s, multiplied in the new century as industrial unions of skilled workers sometimes formed militant alternatives to the power of the capitalists. Immigrants swelled the labor force; and adult newcomers replaced thousands of child laborers in American industry, from the steel plants to the coal mines, from textile mills to the packing houses. Poor Catholics and Jews from Southern and Central Europe dominated this new wave of immigration, until nativists severely reduced the flow

from these areas in the 1920s through the passage of restrictive legislation.¹⁹

For the first time, according to the 1920 U.S. census, more than half of the population lived in urban areas, defined as places with more than 2,500 people. An urban, industrial, and more ethnically diverse population now characterized America. Driven off the land by the increased mechanization of Southern agriculture, African Americans began their own migration north, especially after World War I, often to the bustling cities. This ignited ugly race riots against the newcomers and revived the forgotten truth that racial problems were a national, not regional, problem. How schools would adapt to this new society and whether older patterns of administrative control, curriculum, and classroom practices would survive intact remained impossible to know. Historians argue among themselves over the motives of various reformers and the effects of their reforms on school practice, but everyone agrees that reform was again a dominant theme in education circles, especially in the years separating the depression of the 1890s and the end of World War I.²⁰

Many of the most famous education reformers of the Progressive era (circa 1890-1920) grew up in solidly middle- and upper-middle-class Republican families, not surprising given the historic ties of the party of Lincoln to the public schools. Historian David B. Tyack, however, points out that most of the famous reformers downplayed their partisan affiliations or political orientations. This was the great age of so-called "nonpartisan" school reform, when even the most influential activists

vehemently claimed to oppose political interference in the schools. Most of the elite reformers that Tyack describes, a group he dubs the "administrative progressives," were representatives of business groups; such professionals as physicians, lawyers, and professors; and other well-educated people. They wanted to remake schools in the image of the corporate industries now rising to dominance. In city and countryside, in the name of efficiency, they called for more consolidated and centralized school systems run by high-salaried experts inspired by dispassionate ideals rooted in professional knowledge and norms of objectivity. If politics is the art of wielding power, the administrative progressives were exceedingly political. Their reforms led to the weakening of neighborhood control over schools, the reduction in the size of school boards, and various administrative reforms that shielded a new class of education experts from ordinary people.²¹

The administrative progressives, most of whom were native-born white males, did not rule the world of politics and the schools as they pleased. While they won the war on behalf of the values of centralization, consolidation, and expertise, they lost some significant battles along the way and were forced to make some concessions to their opponents. Socialists, parent organizations, settlement workers, and some progressive women's organizations sometimes fought them and rejected their corporate, business-oriented view of schools and society. Some of these grassroots progressives demanded an array of new social services in the schools to make the schools more serviceable to local, often

working-class children. They championed the construction of playgrounds, the wider use of the schools as social centers, free school breakfasts and lunches, and other improvements. Labor unions and other community groups, fearful of a loss of democratic representation on small, centralized school boards, found ways to elect their representatives to office. Overall, at different times, urban radicals, feminists, and those opposed to corporate business practices refused to be ignored. Women, who dominated in elementary school teaching, organized unions to fight against the haughty behavior of male superintendents.²²

Such dissenting groups, hardly a monolithic force, sometimes joined together when it seemed to serve their particular interests, though admittedly they often fought a rearguard action against their powerful foes. Yet they raised vital questions about the place of democracy in industrial America, where centralized school systems led by the administrative progressives increasingly seemed to deny the importance of neighborhood influence on school policy or, according to labor leaders and socialists, equal opportunities for the working classes and their children. These grassroots reformers usually did not write articles for learned journals or have such titles as doctor or professor, but they doubted that schools or education policy could ever be nonpartisan or should be guided only by the well-to-do. As more and more working-class children entered schools after the turn of the century, the issue of how school systems would treat them and what opportunities they would enjoy became a very heated subject in local communities.

Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, school reformers faced an unprecedented demand for access to public education. Immigrants poured into the schools, leading to nativist movements calling for more programs in Americanization to help socialize the newcomers. One of the most notable developments occurred in the high schools, which increasingly took on more of the characteristics of a mass institution. Secondary enrollments boomed in the new century, especially after World War I. While they enrolled only a fraction of the student body in the 19th century, high schools enrolled the majority of teenagers by the Great Depression. The high school became a battleground of contested ideas. Some leading educators saw a splendid opportunity to apply the ideas of scientific management through the use of recently invented intelligence tests. They often were convinced that many children (especially those from poorer and immigrant backgrounds) could not digest an academic curriculum but should sample more vocational fare and classroom pabulum. Still other reformers called for a dramatic increase in the social side of attending high school, including more nonacademic programs, from competitive sports to membership in school clubs. Efficiency-oriented elites argued with social democrats and other critics about the wisdom of building separate vocational high schools for the non-college bound. Throughout the 1920s, ability grouping and tracking, stimulated by the greater use of intelligence and achievement tests, seemed to change fundamental school practices, though various concerned citizens would continue to debate their value and attack their abuses.²³

By the Great Depression, there was no mistaking the expanded mission and social importance of public education. As more teenagers were unable to find full-time jobs and as child labor laws were passed and enforced, secondary enrollments dramatically expanded; the vocational purposes of education similarly grew. Activists fearful of the harmful, undemocratic effects of separating academic and vocational pupils into separate high schools generally won the battle but lost the war, as comprehensive, consolidated high schools became a common feature of the education landscape. These high schools usually offered separate curricula under one roof, which presumably softened the effects of the new division of the course of study into segments for the academically talented and for their "hand-minded" counterparts. Educators thus had rejected the common school ideal, the faith that all children in theory could master a common, academically respectable curriculum. School people increasingly claimed that it was cruel to have poorly motivated, low-achieving students sit in highly academic classrooms, and that by joining clubs together, rooting for or playing on the same athletic team, and attending the same school, the democratic mission of equal opportunity for everyone was preserved and even extended. Every individual would find something in which they could succeed. The consequence of such thinking was a dramatic increase in taking nonacademic courses among an important minority of pupils. In his exemplary study of Detroit, Jeffrey Mirel highlights the rise of the general curriculum as a holding tank for pupils who were denied ac-

cess to a fully academic course of study. Indeed, throughout the nation in the early decades of the 20th century, various high schools increasingly added nonacademic classes to the curriculum and emphasized higher graduation rates over academic achievement. Some caustic critics in the 1950s understandably called the schools bastions of anti-intellectualism.²⁴

Forming generalizations about education reform and policy in America, for any era of American history, is a hazardous undertaking. Even with the undeniably rapid consolidation and centralization of schools in the first half of this century, schools within individual school districts varied tremendously. Urban high schools in large places, such as Chicago and New York, or smaller places, such as Indianapolis and Syracuse, served different constituencies. Comprehensive high schools were the norm, but most cities had some premier academic institutions — for example, Shortridge High School in Indianapolis — that attracted more middle- and upper-middle-class students than its rivals across town. As in the 19th century, regional differences remained significant. Throughout the South, racial segregation led to unequal treatment of African Americans, and Jim Crow would not legally fall until the *Brown* decision in 1954. And that momentous victory did not end the practice of segregation. In the Northern cities, too, segregated housing patterns, local custom, and the gerrymandering of districts often led to the segregation of neighborhood schools. One can talk about various aspects of “school reform” — testing, consolidation, vocationalism, and so forth — to help capture the main

trends of a particular era. Still, it is important to realize that region, race, social class, and other factors heavily shaped how these trends affected the lives of children.²⁵

Historians have increasingly turned to the social history of education from the 1920s to the present, a long time period that has been surprisingly ignored by many historians. Most books on reform have been on the antebellum period and the Progressive era, but a breadth of scholarship is now appearing on various themes in education change since World War I. Until fairly recently, the standard books on education during the Great Depression examined a narrow set of topics, such as the writings of the radical academics who taught at Teachers College Columbia University in the 1930s and 1940s. Scholars now more fruitfully explore the social history of the schools themselves: changing patterns of course taking in the expanding high schools, the newly found militance of teachers' unions in some communities, the effects of mass education on changing social views about schools, and other exciting subjects. How movements toward scientific management, centralized school administration, greater expertise, gender and racial justice, and vocationalism transformed the nature of schools in different locales and regions of the nation will continue to interest many scholars.²⁶

School reform after 1945 moved into new directions. At the end of World War II, America became the leading world power, the planet's richest nation, and enjoyed expansive economic growth. American capitalism entered a new phase as monopoly control became more global in its reach through newly formed multinational cor-

porations. Economic expansion did not mean peace and tranquility. The peace following World War II was short-lived as America and the Soviet Union engaged in an expensive, dangerous Cold War that sometimes blew hot. Moreover, the denial of opportunities to African Americans gave rise to a powerful civil rights movement that challenged the status quo in the 1950s and 1960s. With the end of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s, however, the American economy began to decline as international competition, declining productivity, and political apathy following the exposure of Watergate took its toll on the American standard of living, faith in politics, and popularity of liberal reform. These momentous changes had a powerful influence on the course of school reform in its many guises over the past half-century.²⁷

A culturally conservative decade, the 1950s nevertheless laid the seeds of social protest that flowered a decade later. Legal challenges against Jim Crow laws in the South had been fought since the 1920s and increasingly bore fruit by the late 1940s, setting the stage for the dramatic ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Here the Court declared that segregated schools were inherently unequal, denying black Americans their constitutional rights. This helped foster a more widespread civil rights movement, especially when the South predictably offered massive resistance to the highest law of the land. In the 1950s, however, very little was accomplished in the area of civil rights in terms of racial integration in the schools. Only when the power of the federal government was brought

to bear on the problem in the 1960s did Southern districts very aggressively begin to dismantle Jim Crow. And many white Southerners turned to private schools, rather than accept the idea of racially integrated public schools. Most Northern districts, especially urban areas, the home to millions of immigrants since the turn of the century but now also home to millions of transplanted Southern blacks, also remained segregated until courts ordered busing to achieve racial integration, made infamous by the dramatic white resistance to the idea in the cradle of liberty, Boston.²⁸

Throughout the 1950s, then, the fruits of prosperity remained unequally divided, ominous for democracy and the nation's schools. American prosperity had grown so dramatically that a few prominent liberal commentators still predicted the end to poverty in the near future. But the separation of cities into relatively privileged, white suburbs and inner neighborhoods inhabited by the poor and minorities was already becoming a matter of increased social concern. The successes of the administrative progressives in building more centralized, consolidated systems dominated by experts who ruled over huge bureaucracies were everywhere apparent by the 1950s. Schools often had a factory-like appearance. Yet unlike machines offering a uniform product, classrooms differed and so did the quality of instruction offered to youth within the same system. In the South, African Americans attended the poorest, worst-funded schools, as they generally always had. It was as if the *Brown* decision had never happened. A reluctant President Dwight D. Eisenhower was embar-

rassed into sending federal troops to help integrate the schools of Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957.²⁹

In the Northern states even rural schools were increasingly consolidated, imitating the practices of their urban cousins. This was supposed to be a reform, leading to improvement. But there was a growing sense that bigness, while impressive, could lead to a loss of neighborhood and community interest in the schools and a sense of alienation among the students. As Wayne Fuller notes in his history of rural education in the Midwest, urban educators had long believed that children received an inferior education in one-room schools. When achievement test results for rural and urban areas in the 1920s failed to demonstrate this, educators appeared baffled and seemed to ignore their own scientific findings. And the quality of urban education — supposedly the schoolmen's great hope for the future — varied greatly, whether in richer suburbs or in poorer inner-city schools. A common system of public schools did not exist anywhere save in name.³⁰

The comprehensive high school remained the basic form of secondary education after World War II. Testers, guidance counselors, and other experts often administered standardized examinations and offered advice on careers to the booming numbers of pupils. High schools swelled as the job market for youth disappeared during the Depression, and they had become a key part of mass education. Fears of juvenile delinquency accelerated as schools tried to educate and socialize youth who traditionally would have dropped out of school and gone to work. The industrial economy, particularly for

whites, was still robust enough in the 1950s to absorb high school dropouts into the ranks of the industrial army. And until its elimination in the early 1970s, the draft took many working-class youth away from their communities to protect the nation from communism. Generally, however, the emphasis throughout the period remained constant: to hold youth in school as long as possible, not to provide them with an equal education, but to slot them into particular adult roles and jobs. Following the successful launch of the Soviet Sputniks in the late 1950s, which caused many politicians and citizens to fear that the nation was losing the Cold War, federal legislation stimulated support for new school programs in foreign languages, math, and science and nurtured the belief that the schools should be doing more to combat communism and to educate better the talented few. No such federal initiative emerged to reduce racial segregation, the unequal funding of schools in the North and South or slum and suburb. Some outspoken academics and even President Eisenhower bemoaned the flabbiness of the public school curriculum, blaming John Dewey and child-centered Progressives for destroying mastery of the basics.³¹

School enrollments continued to grow in most districts in the 1960s, and growth remained the apt metaphor to describe the economy. This did not prevent the deterioration of the cities or of racial relations, which grew more desperate. Indeed, such astute commentators as James B. Conant, a veteran cold warrior, warned in the early 1960s of the social dynamite waiting to explode. In response to the civil rights movement, Lyndon

Baines Johnson and the Democratic Party ushered in momentous legislation in the area of civil rights, voting rights, and federal funding for various innovative school programs. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Head Start, Upward Bound, and other efforts to aid the poor through federally funded school programs were the subject of heated debate and commentary throughout the decade. The federal role in schools, never very central to education policy before World War II, had in a remarkably short period risen significantly. Even this expansion, which would make federal expenditures grow to about 9% of the average of total education spending, did not halt the erosion of the city schools or those of poor rural districts. The gradual disappearance of good-paying industrial jobs from inner cities, white resistance to federal initiatives on behalf of racial integration, and the loss of civil rights leaders through assassination meant that the liberal decade was exceedingly short.

In response to urban riots, the fear of revolution in the streets, and widening opposition to the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon promised law and order and a secret plan to end the war in his successful political campaigns of 1968 and 1972. He played the so-called race card astutely, drawing more white working-class Southerners, who opposed federal movements to desegregate school and society, into the Republican camp. This "Southern Strategy" would continue to strengthen the Republicans and weaken the Democrats in the coming decades.³²

The degree to which liberalism fundamentally shaped school and society in the 1960s was debated at

the time and remains a source of dispute among historians. Liberal theorists, parents, politicians, and educators thought the schools did not move quickly enough to advance poor children, racial integration, and equal opportunities. Still, there was no denying the rise, evident even in the early 1970s, of increased efforts and some successes at integrating the schools — especially in the former Confederacy — or of more short-lived teaching practices, such as open classrooms, schools-without-walls, more freedom by students to select courses of study, and other liberalizing practices. Teachers unions were increasingly defiant, unwilling to kowtow to the administrative progressives who formally ran many school systems. An expansive economic system combined with a liberal ascendancy in Washington led to these and other changes that sometimes permanently transformed certain aspects of school policy and practice.

Conservatives, in turn, pointed to what they saw as the evil effects of liberalism: the end to state-sponsored prayer in schools in the early 1960s and the rise of moral relativism and school violence; the breakdown of traditional classroom discipline and the plummeting of standardized test scores that would continue in the 1970s; and the overall erosion of adult authority and growth of student rights.³³

The collapse of the liberal coalition that had defined national and much local politics in the 1960s followed the unraveling of the Democratic Party as a unified force in the 1970s. Blue-collar voters, who historically had voted Democratic, began shifting their allegiance to the

Republicans in some national contests by the late 1960s. The South, once solidly Democratic, started to attract more Republican voters in response to court-ordered busing and other interventionist reforms, increasingly called "social engineering" by the conservative opposition. Important traditional Democratic allies also started to look inward, elevating the importance of their own interest group. Challenging Martin Luther King Jr. and his emphasis on interracial cooperation came a rising emphasis on black power; women's groups, too, formed influential feminist organizations; and a long-overlooked, disadvantaged group — citizens with disabilities — increasingly demanded federal funding and protection for a succession of reforms, such as special education, mainstreaming, inclusion, and so forth. Identity politics, said some critics, had caused the once more-cohesive civil rights movement, so vital to the modern Democratic party, to come unglued. Losing the war in Vietnam, said the Republicans, symbolized the moral flabbiness and weak will of the Democrats to govern in the international arena, paving the way for the revival of the party of Lincoln.

Throughout the 1970s, the economy weakened, a result of the loss of industrial jobs, the inflation caused by deficit-spending earlier to support the war, the oil embargo, and greater international competition. The unpopularity of the liberalism of the Democratic party also helped fuel the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan, who promised to return America to its former greatness.³⁴

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Republican writers, theorists, and politicians took the lead in ad-

vancing the cause of school reform. They parodied liberals and assailed their programs for multiculturalism, Afrocentrism, bilingual education, and the like, as examples of pedagogical excess. The influential federal report, *A Nation at Risk*, appeared in 1983, highlighting the many flaws in America's schools and demanding a return to an emphasis on academic excellence. Blaming the schools for America's inability to compete internationally, the authors of the report highlighted what seemed to them unmistakable signs of decline: lower standardized test scores, poor results in international tests on academic achievement, a decline in the percentage of students enrolled in academically rigorous courses, and an overall slip in standards at a time when youth needed better preparation to compete with the Japanese and others in the world marketplace. Liberal critics would try to persuade the public that the conservatives had the facts all wrong, that tests had indeed declined in the 1970s but were already rising again, that schools were hardly to blame for America's lack of economic prowess. But the report touched an exposed nerve among many citizens and seemed to influence many state legislators. Throughout the 1980s state legislatures required local districts to increase academic course-taking in the schools, to consider exit exams for a high school degree, to lead campaigns against alcohol and especially drug abuse, to firm up discipline in the classrooms, to extend the school year, and, overall, to reverse what was seen as liberalism run amuck. Other conservatives, fearful of the wave of new immigrants from Asia and the southern hemisphere, revived the call

for restraints or restrictions on immigration and the passage of English-only legislation in many states. Some activists even wanted a constitutional amendment to make English the nation's official language.³⁵

Republican conservatism was so influential that the rising politicians within the national Democratic Party soon sounded more Republican than Democratic, which shaped ongoing discussions about social and education policy. As leader of and activist within the Democratic Leadership Conference, Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas found much common ground with the Republicans, hammering out a set of national goals (not controls) for the public schools in a well-publicized summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1989. Subsequently known as Goals 2000, the reform agenda set several lofty objectives for the nation's public schools by the turn of the century. The bipartisan group agreed that within a few short years America's schools should become a model for the rest of the world. By the year 2000, among other things, high school students would be world leaders in mathematics and science achievement and highly competent in many other academic subjects; young children would be ready to learn when they made the transition from home to school; nearly every youth would graduate from high school; literacy rates would soar; and all children would attend safe, orderly, drug-free schools. We stand too close to the events to know whether any or which of the goals will be met, eventually, in the 21st century. Math and science scores may rise yet remain lower than in competing nations; drug use may increase or fall; zero-tolerance policies to-

ward violence and crime come and go; and graduation rates improve without raising academic standards. Already policy analysts are trying to assess the influence of national goals, and historians will do the same thing in the coming decades, without unanimity of opinion or judgment. And what seemed so obviously important to policymakers in the 1980s during the Reagan years may be discredited or replaced by other concerns in the decades to come.³⁶

Conclusion

What will historians in the future find fascinating about school reform in the final decades of the 20th century? They will likely assess the rising conservative reaction to the liberalism of the 1960s that gave birth to *A Nation at Risk*, as well as examine a host of topics not part of or central to that influential report. How well did Americans square their rhetorical attachment to democratic ideals of equality and educational opportunity with the realities of racial segregation, the division of inner city and suburb, and the persistence of ability grouping and tracking in many schools? What exactly were the education needs of most people living and working in a postindustrial economy of service jobs for the many but also high-tech jobs for some citizens? Did the rise of Republican support for school vouchers lead to long-range public funding for private schools and did this spell doom for the survival of public education? How did welfare reform shape children's lives and their education? And, finally, how did the rising influence of Spanish-speaking immigrants and citizens transform ethnic and racial politics in education decision-making? Historians will be pulled down many

roads as the present becomes transformed into the past and as they gain enough distance from today to make more dispassionate assessments about the state of education as the millennium approached.

Clearly, the path from the antebellum period to the present is a long one. The context for reform has changed dramatically. Once a nation of rural residents engaged primarily in agriculture, America was transformed by commercial capitalism and then by many phases of industrial growth, from the formation of monopolies and trusts before World War I to the making of multinational corporations in subsequent decades. Immigrants, both from the countryside and Europe, often the children of peasants and former slaves, flowed into America's cities in the 20th century, helping to make America the world's richest nation. After World War II, despite its fabulous wealth, America found itself becoming two nations, one separated between slum and suburb. The decline of America's industrial might by the 1970s and the increasingly competitive and global nature of the economy only further altered the social context within which teachers labored, subject to the changing beliefs of policymakers and political forces.

From the antebellum period to the present, school reformers in America have invested enormous emotional and material resources in the nation's schools. Like the Puritans who first settled in Massachusetts, most reformers in every age concluded that the next generation of youth was in peril, facing what seems like an inevitable state of decline. In the 19th century, reformers worried about lapsed morals among the young, who

faced a world of tightened discipline in the workplace. In the early 20th century, reformers pursued ever-accelerating efforts to slot the young into their future occupational roles, whether as housewife or industrial worker or professional. And in recent years, schools at times have even been held accountable for an array of ills: the nation's declining industrial output, its place on the world economic stage, its rising street crime, its teenage pregnancy rates, or its failure to integrate white and black. All of this has been said confidently even though most adults do not choose to live in integrated neighborhoods, do not always keep marriages and families intact, cannot always avoid vice and chemical dependencies, and so forth.

Schools have been a theater where contending interests fight for their vision of what America has been and should become. Should advocates of tuition tax credits or school vouchers end the public school monopoly on tax dollars, the social history of education in the early 21st century will offer an interesting tale for future historians to recount and analyze. For now, however, the lasting power of the public schools, their ability to survive despite so much criticism in our time, still deserves our attention and further scrutiny.

The context in which reform has occurred obviously changed dramatically over the past two centuries. Reform also has been remarkably complicated, ensuring that while dominant forces triumphed mightily at particular times, school reform remained subject to deep conflict. Just as school bureaucracies tightened in the Victorian and Progressive eras, a minority of reformers

fought against the mind-numbing formalism of the schools, the imperatives of centralized authority, and the full conversion of schools into factory-like settings. Just as white supremacists and nativists thought segregation and cutting off the flow of immigrants in the 1920s would solve the "color problem," civil rights movements took on renewed life through the leadership of activist organizations and such heroic individuals as Martin Luther King Jr. Just as liberals thought the Great Society would live forever, conservatives attacked its major assumptions and urged voters and educators to accept their alternative moral and economic views and sense of priorities on academic achievement. Those who believe in cyclical theories of history assume that conservatism, after some decades in the sun, will in the near future retire or be retired to the shade.

Schools always fail to satisfy some particular group of reformers, even those seemingly with tremendous power at a particular moment in history. This demonstrates the difficulty of changing such complex institutions, which are sometimes seen as both the cause and cure of most of America's social ills.

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Notes

1. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), is the best interpretation of the complexities of school reform in America.
2. Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), offers the clearest explanation of the broad social and educational trends of the period. Also see Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban System: New York City, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); and Carl F. Kaestle and Maris A. Vinovskis, *Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
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*The brother of a World War II seaman
killed in action shows his classmates
where it happened in this official
U.S. Navy photograph, dated April 1944.*

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